

# Rooted in Tradition

By Jody Morgan

The lilacs are beginning to bloom all over Duxbury. Great hedges of lilacs line the roads. Their lavender and white blossoms soften the angles of buildings old and new. *Syringea vulgaris* was common in Concord when Louisa May Alcott wrote "Under the Lilacs" in 1877. George Washington transplanted two large lilacs to stand on either side of his north gate in 1785. But when the Pilgrims sailed for the New World, there were no lilacs in North America.

Indeed, lilacs did not reach English soil until the 16th century. In 1620, prized specimens graced only the gardens of the rich and famous. Yet tradition credits William Brewster with having the first lilacs brought to America from Holland for his Duxbury property, where they still bloom today.

William Brewster did not belong to the landed gentry. He did, however, manage to learn to read and write and to translate enough Latin in his youth to enter Cambridge University in 1580. He did not stay long enough to complete his degree. Instead, probably through the aid of some influential benefactor, he joined the service of Sir William Davison, a rising star in Queen Elizabeth's court and an avowed Puritan.

Brewster's first voyage to Holland was not as a fugitive. In 1585, he sailed in the company of courtiers to collect security for the military assistance Queen Elizabeth was extending to the Dutch in their war with Spain, the same war in which Myles Standish served as a lieutenant. The keys to the city of Flushing received by Davison were entrusted to Brewster, who slept the first night with them under his pillow. William Bradford further relates that

upon the ambassador's triumphal return to England, Brewster was commanded to wear the gold chain presented to Davison by the Dutch.

Continued favor at the court was not Brewster's fate. When Mary Queen of Scots lost her head, William Davison lost his position. He had signed the death warrant of Elizabeth's cousin according to Elizabeth's instructions, but her majesty blamed him for failing to delay

the final bell tolled for the structure 30 years after Brewster fled from Scrooby to Amsterdam, the very year Duxbury was incorporated as a town. George Willison notes in "The Pilgrim Reader": "Nothing of the old manor house remains today but a few remnants of its walls, long since incorporated in the structure of a 'plain farm tenement' built upon the ruins of the palace after it had crumbled and fallen down, being demolished in 1637."

Although never ordained as a minister, William Brewster led his congregation as a ruling elder. While living in Holland, he earned money teaching English to Dutch, Danish and German gentlemen through their mutual command of Latin. He set up the Pilgrim Press in Leyden from whence he smuggled Separatist literature back into England. Hunted by the British crown, Brewster

eluded capture while negotiating passage to the New World.

Teaching remained one of Elder Brewster's great personal achievements as he struggled along with his neighbors to survive in the wilderness. Upon his death in 1643, Brewster left a library of 400 volumes, including works on horticulture. William Bradford wrote of Brewster: "He was wise and discreet and well spoken, having a grave and deliberate utterance, of a very cheerful spirit, very sociable and pleasant amongst his friends, of an humble and modest mind, of a peaceable disposition, undervaluing himself and his abilities and sometimes overvaluing others."

The house that William Brewster built on Standish shore, probably at the time of

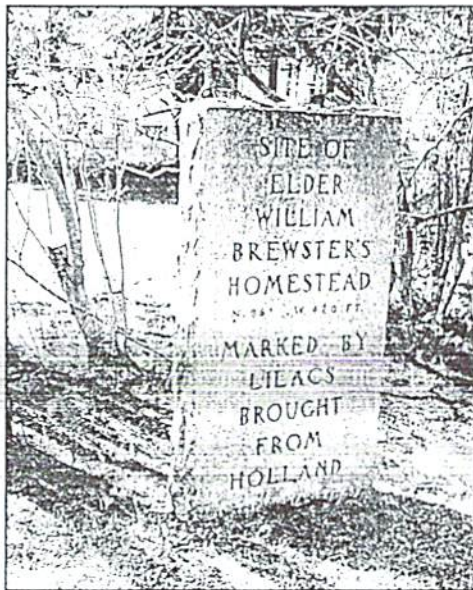
his son Love's marriage in 1634, no longer stands. The lilacs and the site they mark became the property of the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society in 1951 through the gift of Ellis Brewster of Plymouth, a descendant of the Mayflower passenger. To date, however, no document has been discovered to substantiate the Brewster lilac tradition.

Did Elder Brewster first learn to love lilacs when he was consorting with the English nobility? Did they remind him of his youth? Or did he discover them during his years of exile in the Low Countries? Did the Elder, in fact, plant the lilacs at all?

"The white rose is for the bride; the red for the groom." Thus, a friend from an older generation explained to me the tradition that had left two bushes blooming beside a deserted cellar hole in a New Hampshire wood. The trees now surrounding the ancient stone wall indicated that the pasture had not been such for at least 100 years. The precise identity of the original garden-er did not matter. It was enough to sense that the fragrance of the flowers somehow transcended the dimension of time.

Nor is written evidence essential to support the claim that Elder Brewster had his lilacs brought from Holland and that they are, in fact, the first of their species to reach America. Visit the site, savor the tranquillity and decide for yourself whether the impact of the memorial is not sufficient proof of William Brewster's legacy to a community rooted in tradition. Above all, enjoy the rare gifts of this teacher eloquent enough to transmit his message across the barrier of time.

To visit the Brewster lilacs, follow Standish Street out of Hall's Corner. A granite marker just before 311 Standish Street marks the entrance to the private lane leading to the lilacs. The lilacs are tended, as they have been for 41 years, by the Kelso family. Please be respectful of their care and the Elder's memory when you walk down the lane.



A granite marker indicates the lane leading to the lilacs.

the execution as she had privately instructed him. Before returning to the tiny town of Scrooby, Brewster remained with Davison while he was incarcerated in the Tower of London for two years.

Scrooby manor, the care of which passed to William Brewster from his father, was a 40-room residence belonging to the Archbishop of York. In addition to managing the estate, Brewster was responsible for keeping a tavern and fresh horses available for the post riders between London and Scotland. Here he gathered his fellow Separatists to worship and to denounce the abuses of the established church.

The building, seldom used by the Anglican clergy, was decaying in Brewster's child-